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Temple B’Nai Shalom

by Janis Woodward

On Friday, November 27, 2015 at 8:00 PM, I attended the Shabbat service at Temple B’nai Shalom. Temple B’nai Shalom is located on 7612 Old Ox Road, in Fairfax, Virginia. The denominational affiliation of this institution is Reform Judaism. There are two rabbis at Temple B’nai Shalom. Rabbi Amy R. Perlin is the senior rabbi and Rabbi Laura Rappaport is the assistant rabbi.

As I walked up to the Temple B’nai Shalom, the first thing that went through my mind was that it was very big and grand. The building’s architecture reminded me of a Catholic church. The building is triangular-shaped, with an abundance of large windows. The large windows reflected how open the congregation was to the community. I called in advance to make sure that my dress attire was appropriate for the Friday service. On Fridays, the dress attire is business casual. However, on Saturdays, when there is a Bat/Bar Mitzvah, the dress attire is a little less casual and dressier instead.

I attended the Friday service with my older sister, and as we approached the huge doors to the synagogue, we were greeted by members of the congregation. As we entered through the doors, an usher handed us a service folder. The service folder contained the schedule of the night’s service and the prayers and songs that were going to be performed for the night. The usher was very friendly and offered answers to all my questions about the

service. The service we attended was a special service that focused on college homecoming.

The synagogue was very large on the inside. It was lined with pews and aisles, enough to seat everyone that attended. The seats all faced towards a stage with a podium for the service leaders and any guest speakers. Behind the podium was a giant wooden symbolic structure, with words in Hebrew written along it. I saw many families—husbands, wives, grandpas, granddaughters. There were mostly female and male adults and a few teenagers. The congregation was predominantly Jewish/Jewish American. Since the synagogue was fairly large, I found it easy for my sister and I to blend in. We did not stand out; it was as if we had been attending the services regularly. No one really starts conversations; we all just keep to ourselves until the service starts.

It was 8:00 PM and the service had begun. Everyone was seated quietly ready to listen, worship, and praise. In front of our seats was a “siddur” or prayer book for us to read along with the service. The siddur contained Hebrew prayers and English translations of the prayers. The opening was very casual, yet reserved. The rabbi greeted us and told us what pages to turn to in our books so we could follow along. Prayers were said and the rabbi told us when to rise and when to sit. The Shabbat liturgy consisted of special prayers that taught the lessons of Shabbat. Many of the prayers included themes such as God’s

creation of the world and how every single human was made in God's image. The prayers were all praising God, not requesting anything of God. The service was ritualistic and the congregation was quite reserved through it all—to express politeness. The rabbi talked of the congregation's mission statement, which stressed the importance of the well-being of the members and the local community as well. The congregation is very dedicated to social action such as helping the needy, donating to organizations, and being very caring and accepting. The temple goes by a saying “tikkun olam”, which means making the world a better place for everyone.

The service also happened to be a “College Homecoming Shabbat Service”. Throughout the service a few students in college, who were members of the congregation, gave sermons about their college experience and how it has related to their spiritual experience as well. They talked about the stress and pressures of college and how remaining faithful to the Torah has guided and helped them in many ways. They talked about being glad to be home with their families and how thankful they are for them. Their thoughts were very moving and inspirational. It especially resonated with me since I am a first year college student on my own spiritual journey—questioning life and death, searching for a purpose, figuring out who I am all while thinking about calculus homework and trying to make this essay sound interesting. During the service, the ritual of reading the Torah is practiced. The Torah is in a giant scroll located on the inside of the giant wooden structure called the “Ark”. It is important for everyone to stand when the Ark is open and the Torah is being taken out of its special place. Everyone can sit once the rabbi starts to read from the parashah (portion) of

the Torah. The walls of the synagogue were lined with 12 vibrant, colorful tapestries. The 12 tapestries depict the 12 months of the Hebrew calendar. They represent the community's traditions and values through amazing artistry. It was 9:15 and time for the Oneg Shabbat. Oneg Shabbat means “joy of the Sabbath” in Hebrew; it is a celebratory gathering right after the Shabbat service. There was food, music, and singing. Many members mingled and started conversations with my sister and me. I told them about my assignment and they thought it was a wonderful idea. They were really glad that I chose Temple B'nai Shalom to conduct my research and widen my spiritual/religious mind.

I have been to three different churches now, whether it is in a small building or a synagogue. There is one thing that has stayed constant all throughout my experiences with these three institutions, and that is the sense of community. Being kind, loving, helping others, and making one feel welcome and at home are virtues that transcend religion. It is the basis of all religion and it is able to contribute to a healthier spiritual being. •

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